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ABSTRACT

In a study to determine whether the writing apprehension of college writers is diminished by regular freewriting and whether apprehension affects the quality of writing, two experimental classes spent ten minutes freewriting each day while two control classes spent ten minutes on vocabulary building. The pretest and posttest consisted to two 40-minute essays and Daly and Miller's 26-item writing apprehension instrument. The study focused on four questions: Do students who freewrite regularly become more fluent than those who do not? Do students who freewrite regularly produce better quality essays than those who do not? Which of eight components of writing are most affected by freewriting? and, Do students who freewrite regularly display less writing apprehension than those who do not? Results indicated that freewriting did not produce (1) significant effects on fluency or on any of the designated components of writing, or (2) measurable differences in writing apprehension. However, different teachers did produce significantly different results in their class's writing apprehension. For most classes, some heightening of anxiety appears to result in better writing, although a few students may need to be taught adaptive responses to reduce or reverse the detrimental effects of apprehension. (Tables of findings are included.) (EL)

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The Effects of Writing Apprehension on Writing Quality

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CS 209 069

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The Effects of Writing Apprehension on Writing Quality

The assumption that apprehension is a deterrent to good writing, that we and our students would write better without any, is typical of the notions we cling to because they seem sensible and self-evident. That is is desirable to lower apprehension in a writing class was an assumption in my 1982 study. In light of the results of the study, however, the assumption now requires rethinking.

One of the purposes of my study, The Effects of Freewriting on the Fluency of Student Writers, was to determine whether the writing apprehension of college writers is diminished by regular freewriting and whether apprehension affects the quality of writing. The experiment was implemented by two college teachers who taught two sections of the same composition course, allowing for two experimental and two control classes. Treatment consisted of 10 minutes of freewriting each day, a minimum of four days each week. The control classes spent 10 minutes each day on vocabulary building; otherwise, instruction was as much the same as possible. At the beginning of the quarter, a pre-test, consisting of two 40-minute essays and Daly and Miller's (1975) 26-item apprehension instrument, was administered on three consecutive days to the 56 subjects. One essay was in a personal expressive mode; the other was in an objective argumentative mode. The same two essays and the apprehension

instrument, all administered in the same way, were used as post-test. These research questions were the focus of the study:

1. Do students who freewrite regularly become more fluent than those who do not?
2. Do students who freewrite regularly produce better quality essays than those who do not?
3. Which of eight components of writing are most affected by freewriting?
4. Do students who freewrite regularly display less writing apprehension than those who do not?

The essays were scored analytically by trained raters on eight variables: Ideas, Organization, Wording, Voice, Point of View, Rhythm, Mechanics, and Length. I defined and described the criteria to meet the needs of the study by modifying Diederich's (1974) scale. I trained the raters to use the criteria and the scoring sheets designed for the study and held regular reliability checks to assure reader consistency. Two raters scored each of the four essays written by each subject on the eight designated criteria, and the two scores were averaged to get a single pre-test score; the same was done for the post-test. A multivariate analysis of covariance with the pre-test covaried was run to determine which, if any, of the components were most affected by freewriting. An analysis of covariance was run on the apprehension scores

to determine whether freewriting diminished writing apprehension.

Under the conditions of this study, that is, research techniques as clean as is possible in a classroom study but under the limitation of one quarter, freewriting did not produce significant effects on fluency or on any of the designated components of writing. It also did not produce measurable differences in writing apprehension. The statistical analysis of the data, though, did reveal significant differences in the teacher factor, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

MANCOVA Summary of Significance for

Combined Essays

Factor	F	Degrees of freedom	p less than
GT	1.732	8/37	.128
T	11.571	8/37	.001*
G	.826	8/37	.585

Groups of Teacher 2, both control and experimental, scored higher in Ideas, Organization, and Length than the groups of Teacher 1, shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Adjusted Cell Means for Combined Essay Scores

	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Group 1	Group 2
Ideas	5.5	6.1*	5.9	5.7
Organization	4.6	6.3*	5.5	5.4
Mechanics	4.7	5.2	5.0	5.0
Wording	2.9	2.8	2.9	2.8
Voice	3.5	3.6	3.8	3.4
Point of View	3.6	3.3	3.5	3.4
Rhythm	2.8	2.7	2.8	2.7
Length	1.6	3.7*	2.6	2.7

Analysis of the apprehension data also showed significant teacher difference. (It should be noted that these figures represent a scoring system whereby high scores

mean low apprehension and low scores, high apprehension.)

The analysis of covariance, Table 3, shows that adjusted cell means for the post-test scores are essentially the same for Teacher 1 in both experimental and control groups. For Teacher 2, the adjusted post-test cell means are lower for the experimental group than for the control, indicating that the level of apprehension in the experimental group increased when adjusted for the covariate. The major difference, however, lies in the discrepancy between the scores of the two teachers.

Table 3

Adjusted Cell Means for the Apprehension Scores

		Group 1 (control)	2 (experimental)
Teacher	1	94.21	94.82
	2	86.73	84.74

Although adjusted cell means provide the information needed for drawing conclusions, the simple cell means in Table 4 provide interesting information about how the raw scores changed from pre-test to post-test.

Table 4

Unadjusted Cell Means for the Apprehension Scores

Pre-test

		Group 1 (control)	2 experimental
Teacher	1	82.94	93.25
	2	81.81	87.75

Post-test

		Group 1 (control)	2 experimental
Teacher	1	92.19	98.75
	2	84.06	85.50

Teacher 1 decreased writing apprehension in both the control and experimental groups (high scores mean low apprehension) while Teacher 2 increased apprehension slightly in the experimental group. Therefore, the groups with higher apprehension were the groups with the higher scores in Ideas, Organization, and Length.

What all this means is that two teachers who were chosen for the study because they understood and used regularly the practices of Don Murray (1968) and Peter Elbow (1973) and Mina Schaughnessy (1977) were still so different from each other that they produced different results in their students, regardless

of the method, in this case, regular freewriting. Nevertheless, both instructors found the freewriting method so rewarding that they use it in every class they teach. Teacher 1 reports:

> Freewriting first in the class period changes the tenor of the class. It is peaceful, quiet. Writing without any viewing or evaluation attached seems to be healthy. I get as much done writing 10 minutes as I do without. The thing that is most wonderful is the absence of tension that I now realize fills a classroom when people are in a test situation.

Having placed a great deal of importance on anxiety in the classroom, Teacher 1 significantly reduced writing apprehension in both classes. Freewriting made no measurable difference, however, either in reducing anxiety or raising writing scores.

Teacher 2, on the other hand, placed little, if any, importance on apprehension and emphasized writing in abundance and improving test scores. Teacher 2 reports:

> The free writing group ended up with better grades. More of them passed the BSE, The Basic Skills Examination. Approximately 70% of my freewriters passed the BSE, while only about 50% of the other group did.

> My classes write a lot; both classes wrote at least twice a week. The only difference was the 10 minutes of freewriting every day. And the freewriting class was the better class to work with.

Writing apprehension in Teacher 2's experimental class increased slightly but, at the same time, scores on several components of writing--Ideas, Organization, and Length--increased significantly. And again, teacher difference, not freewriting, made the difference in the changes that occurred in the classroom. The report of Teacher 2 that the freewriting class made better grades on the BSE presents an interesting problem because the data from this study can neither corroborate nor explain it. At any rate, both teachers have retained their enthusiasm and faith in the freewriting exercise as a fruitful method of getting their students to write willingly and of establishing a calm and cooperative atmosphere. The teachers closely connected freewriting with less apprehension and deemed both good.

Now the question is raised of whether the teacher factor is so overwhelming that the methods used actually make little difference? Do the interests and skills of the teacher dictate what the students learn? Although the data from this study indicate strongly that this hypothesis may be true, it is not a conclusion of the study, simply a thought-provoking

question and perhaps some confirmation for what many people suspect: that the individuality of the teacher may be more important than the method used. Many effective English teachers over the decades have produced good writers in spite of having forced students to outline, drilled them in grammar, and over-criticized their papers in red ink. The findings of this study suggest that educators need to continue trying to identify the qualities that make up the effective teacher and determine whether those qualities are inborn or teachable--not a new question but still a viable one.

The other question raised by the data is also one we suspect is true; that is, is there an optimum level of writing apprehension that is necessary for achievement, but a point at which too much arousal begins to impair performance? Is there a helpful amount of anxiety that can be identified and fostered? Is there a level of apprehension that can be identified as detrimental? If so, how can we best reduce harmful amounts?

The answers to these questions are unclear at present, but there is much information available to us from research done by our psychology colleagues, and it seems reasonable that it might be applied to writing apprehension. The viewpoint of psychologists toward anxiety in general, according to Spielberger (1972), is that "the consequences of anxiety are usually negative, interfering, and debilitating in nature,

although all consequences depend on the demands and requirements of situations. Therefore, the consequences are complex and interactional in nature--and, as a result, are sometimes facilitating, helpful, and enhancing to adaptation, performance, and adjustment."

Why is anxiety sometimes helpful instead of debilitating? I don't pretend to be an expert in anxiety. My setting is the Counseling Center instead of the English Department, and my colleagues who are psychologists tell me the relationships of learning to motivation to performance can be viewed as a mathematical equasion:

Learning X Motivation = Performance

If either term is zero, the combination is zero. Performance occurs only when some degree of both learning and motivation is present. Also, the same level of performance may result from different combinations of the two factors. A highly skilled writer who is poorly motivated might turn out the same quality paper, based on different criteria, of course, as a less skilled writer who is highly motivated. By doing some substitution in the equation, we can see where anxiety fits into this schema. If learning is the writing skills, and if motivation is divided into its two parts--drive motivation and incentive motivation, and if performance is writing quality, then we can write the equasion:

$$\text{Writing Skills} \times \left\{ \begin{matrix} \text{Drive Motivation} \\ \text{(including Anxiety)} \\ \text{Incentive Motivation} \end{matrix} \right\} = \text{Writing Quality}$$

As long as the combination of the first two factors is below optimal performance level, added anxiety can enhance performance. When optimal level is reached, however, and motivation gets too high, anxiety takes over with harmful effects: recent skills are forgotten, rigidity forms, stereotyped thinking sets in, and performance drops.

My psychology colleagues also tell me that anxiety is two-pronged; it may be a personality trait and/or a temporary state. People with trait anxiety are anxiety prone and suffer chronically. Some of the causes of trait anxiety are:

1. Specific past experiences, especially preschool and early school experiences, in which important motives have been thwarted.
2. Racial-ethnic minority status and/or lower social class status.
3. Specific aspects of parent-child relationship.
4. Patterns of socialization of threat reactions
5. Sex and sex-role identification.
6. Birth order.
7. General beliefs about the environment and one's relation to it.
8. Counterharm resources of the individual (e.g., his intellectual abilities).

State anxiety is that caused situationally, and some of its antecedents are (Spielberger, 1972):

1. Stress conditions--conditions that lead to threatened deprivations of anticipated satisfactions.
2. Ambiguity concerning the nature of the threat.
3. Situational constraints.
4. Power of harm-producing factors in the environment.
5. Strength of the motive(s) endangered by stressful conditions.
6. Conflict engendered in the situation, e.g., where one of the goals pertinent to the situation is endangered by another's satisfaction.
7. Degree of felt uncertainty about what can be done to cope with threat.
8. Degrees of tolerance of ambiguity.

And finally, these are some consequences of anxiety that affect performance:

1. Cautiousness, rigidity, stereotyped thinking.
2. Dependency, direction-seeking, conforming tendencies.
3. Reduced responsiveness to the environment.
4. Interference with a variety of cognitive and mediational processes.
5. Increased drive level.

6. Deterioration in complex intellectual, problem-solving, achievement, and learning activities.
7. Increased responsiveness to reinforcement.
8. Increased susceptibility to persuasion and the behavior of models.
9. Preoccupation with the demands of self rather than the demands of the learning situation.
10. Increased isolation from others.
11. Enhanced learning of certain types of tasks.

With the Daly and Miller apprehension instrument and other instruments like the Test Anxiety Scale and the General Anxiety Scale, high and low apprehensives can be identified in the classroom. In my study, one or two students in each class typically scored very low, and three or four scored very high. The few in a class who need help can be taught adaptive responses to reduce or even reverse the detrimental effects of apprehension. The harmful effects of writing apprehension on writing quality, then, seem to be not a major problem for the class as a whole but a problem for the few in each class whose apprehension is too high, or perhaps too low, for maximum performance. For the class as a whole, whose motivation may generally remain below optimal performance level, some heightening of anxiety appears to result in better writing.

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